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ABSTRACT

The pro-active telephone-tutored delivery mode developed by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's Rural Library Training Project provides a model for increasing the completion rate of traditional correspondence courses, relieving the isolation factor associated with correspondence, and providing pacing while still allowing flexibility for the learner. In order to make this delivery mode successful and cost effective, several factors were incorporated: (1) the establishment of a schedule for assignments and telephone calls; (2) the development of a student handbook to explain all procedures and expectations and the incorporation of the study of this handbook into the first required course; (3) the development of a general instructor handbook and of instructor handbooks for each course that contain directions for dealing with the students and the materials specific to the course; and (4) the development of structured course materials that incorporate specific activities for follow-up by the tutors, as well as self-tests, assignments, and behavioral objectives. The success of this delivery mode has been measured by completion rates of 94.6% overall, satisfactory achievement as measured by final course grades, acceptable cost, and self-reported student satisfaction. (The address and telephone number of the project coordinator are included as well as lists of supplementary documentation.) (Author/GL)

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TELEPHONE-TUTORING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The pro-active telephone-tutored delivery mode developed by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's Rural Library Training Project provides a model for increasing the completion rate of traditional correspondence courses, relieving the isolation factor associated with correspondence and providing pacing, while still allowing flexibility for the learner.

In order to make this delivery mode successful and cost effective, several factors were incorporated:

1. Establishment of a schedule for assignments and telephone calls.
2. Development of a student handbook to explain all procedures and expectations and the incorporation of the study of this handbook into the first required course.
3. Development of a general instructor handbook and of instructor handbooks for each course containing directions for dealing with the students and the materials specific to each course.
4. Development of structured course materials, incorporating specific activities for follow-up by the tutors, as well as self-tests, assignments, and behavioral objectives.

The success of this delivery mode has been measured by completion rates of 94.6% overall, satisfactory achievement as measured by final course grades, acceptable cost, and self-reported student satisfaction.

Telephone-tutoring in Distance Education

The pro-active telephone-tutored delivery mode provides a model for increasing the completion rate of traditional correspondence courses, relieving the isolation factor associated with correspondence and providing pacing, while still allowing flexibility for the learner.

This teaching method is one of three methods used by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology to deliver Rural Library Training Project courses to the staff of small school and public libraries in rural Alberta (*). The library training curriculum was designed for distance education and utilizes on-site instruction, teleconference delivery, and telephone-tutored correspondence.

While teleconference and on-site instruction are well-established and successful delivery modes, correspondence courses have had a less than desirable reputation. Standard completion rates are usually quoted as 10% to 30%. This is usually attributed to two factors: the lack of pacing and the feeling of isolation on the part of the student.

The use of telephone tutors has been tried by Athabasca University for some courses, with results that indicated this mode was worth testing further; however, pro-active telephone-tutoring has not previously been firmly established as an on-going delivery mode for an entire program.

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* Development of this project is detailed extensively in four reports published by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and also available in microfiche from the Educational Resources Information Center. Titles are listed at the end of this document.

For Rural Library Training Project courses, each tutor is assigned a group of students and is instructed to call each student on a regular and pre-arranged basis, so that each student can expect to hear from her tutor at a certain time every two weeks. The phone calls are structured with specific learning objectives. At each call, the instructor discusses the activities presented in the course materials, difficulties with concepts or applications, and the assignments. There are assignments for each module and these must be postmarked by specific dates according to a schedule distributed at the beginning of the term.

In order to make this delivery mode successful and cost effective, several factors were incorporated:

1. Establishment of a schedule for assignments and telephone calls.

   This gives the student and the tutor a framework within which to work. The schedule can be adjusted within limits by mutual agreement of the tutor and the student; thus the schedule can be modified to accommodate not only illnesses, vacations, and family disruptions, but also individual student learning pace. Tutors are encouraged to maintain the schedule as much as possible since one of the problems of traditional correspondence is the propensity of students to procrastinate. All courses must be completed by a set date and only in emergencies is the final deadline extended.

2. Development of a student handbook to explain all procedures and expectations and the incorporation of the study of this handbook into the first required course.

   It had been the experience of many tutors that students tend to ignore printed material on which they are not tested or evaluated, and so in order for the tutors to be assured that students had read and internalized the directions in the student handbook, the study of this document was incorporated into the first required course, Introduction to Library Training. The handbook contains sections on project objectives, certificate requirements, course materials, preparation for class or the telephone call, evaluation methods, and specific examination directions for each delivery mode.

3. Development of a general instructor handbook and of instructor handbooks for each course containing directions for dealing with the students and the materials specific to each course.

In order to ensure consistency and structure for the instructors, two types of instructor handbooks were developed. The first is a general instructor handbook containing sections on project background and objectives, student demographics, certificate requirements, course materials, expected student preparation, evaluation methods, and tutor/instructor meetings. Also included are specific procedures for each of the delivery modes including getting started, keeping track, reporting responsibilities, teaching techniques, examination procedures, and resources.

The second type of instructor handbook is specific to each course. These individual handbooks give the instructor suggested questions to ask each student at the telephone call, specific activities to discuss, and amplification on course material or expected difficulties. They also contain marking schemes for assignments as well as descriptions of what should be included in the assignments and usual difficulties with assignments.

These handbooks enable the project coordinator to hire as tutors people with experience in their field but with little or no instructional experience. Lesson plans, so to speak, are provided and as long as the handbooks are followed, consistency in course delivery is assured within the limits of human variance.

4. Development of structured course materials, incorporating specific activities for follow-up by the tutors, as well as self-tests, assignments, and behavioral objectives.

At the beginning of each printed course package there is a section that lists the resources students will need to complete that course. In some cases they will need textbooks, videotapes, or certain materials such as reference books or audiovisual equipment. Each printed course package consists of a title page, an introduction which lists assignment weights and course materials needed, and units or chapters called modules. Each module has the following parts:

- Why statement, including an overview of what students are going to learn in the module and why it is important,
- Specific learning objectives,
- Topic sections containing readings, viewings, commentary, and activities. These activities often provide the basis for discussion with telephone tutors and usually deal with the application of theory to the student's own situation.

- Review questions designed to help students test their understanding of the material presented in the module.

- Assignments which must be mailed to the tutor by a set deadline. These are designed to be directly applicable to the student's own library.

- Appendices which contain supplementary reading material.

In addition there is an answer book and students receive both a covering letter listing the name of their tutor and a short biography.

Students are instructed to study the appropriate module before the tutor phones. This way the student is prepared to discuss the material and the activities with the tutor. The phone call becomes a structured lesson.

The success of this delivery mode has been measured by four accomplishments:

1. High completion rates.

The completion rates in Rural Library Training Project telephone-tutored correspondence are between 89% and 100% in all courses. This is comparable to completion rates in teleconference, which range from 77% to 100%, and to those for on-site instruction which range from 90% to 100%. Overall average completion rate in each mode is 94.8% for telephone-tutoring, 91.9% for teleconference, and 96% for on-site instruction for those courses offered in more than one delivery mode.

These rates are also significantly better than completion rates for the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's Library and Information Technology courses which are delivered in traditional correspondence fashion and range from 47% to 81% with an average of 60.6% completion. The literature dealing with distance education often reports figures of from 10% to 30% for traditional correspondence. (*)

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* John A. Baath, "Distance students' learning -- empirical findings and theoretical deliberations", Distance Education, 3:1 (1982), 9. Baath quotes numerous researchers and figures ranging from 8% to 66% completion.

2. Satisfactory achievement as measured by final course grades.

   Final course grades in telephone-tutored correspondence indicate understanding of the material and are comparable to grades earned in Rural Library Training Project courses delivered in other modes with from 86% to 96% earning a grade of B or better, while teleconference grades range from 61.5% to 100% earning a grade of B or better, and on-site grades range from 90% to 100% with B or better.

3. Acceptable cost.

   Cost of telephone-tutored correspondence is higher than for on-site or teleconference classes with 20 students or more, but courses do not need a specific number of students in order to break even. With a registration fee of $101/student, all operating and part of the administrative costs are recovered.

   This cost is deemed cost-effective because of the high completion rates. Thus the cost per completed student is lower than for courses where there is a lower completion rate.

4. Self-reported student satisfaction.

   At the end of each course, students are asked to complete an extensive course evaluation form rating materials, delivery mode, and tutor. The comments on these evaluation forms indicate a high degree of satisfaction among telephone-tutored students, as do the continued high enrollments in this delivery mode even in areas where teleconference is available.

For more information contact the project coordinator,

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Accompanying documentation:

- Course curriculum and course descriptions,
- Sample pages from RLT 32 Instructor Manual and RLT 32 course materials,
- External Evaluation of Phase Four.

Supplementary documents available from Educational Resources Information Center:

A Cooperative Project for the Development and Delivery of Training to Rural Library Staff Across Alberta.

ED 257 466 First Phase Report
ED 265 869 Phase Two/Three First Interim Report
ED 272 210 Phase Two/Three Second Interim Report

Available from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology:

Rural Library Training Project: Phase Four Final Summative Report (ED 289 521)